

PALESTINE IN MONTREAL

Proposal for researching and scripting a one-hour film

Most of the Palestinians in Canada came from various Arab countries after the six-day war in 1967. They had been tolerating a second-class status in those countries expecting to be able to return home in Palestine before they died, but when that war resulted in the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, their hopes of returning home were dashed and they came here expecting to find lives of mutual respect in Canada's multi-cultural fabric. They have been quietly active in lobbying and fund-raising for programmes of aid to the 3.7 Palestinian refugees left behind in UNRWA camps around the Middle East. In response to their pressure, CIDA has increased to \$10 million its annual contribution to UNRWA camps. And Palestinian-Canadians have helped set up NGOs to get aid to the occupied territories (Medical Aid to Palestine, Project Hope, Zatoun, Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, for example)

I have met a few of the older Palestinian-Canadians, and they have very colourful, moving stories that need to be told. I also have a long-held interest in Canadian policy toward the Middle East, as expressed in the film I made about the first Gulf War, "Peace-keeper at War" (NFB, 1992). And one thing I have discovered since making that film is that Canada played a little-known central role in bringing about the partition of Palestine in 1948, the cause of the Palestinian diaspora. Lester B. Pearson, then in his last year as Under-Secretary of External Affairs in Ottawa, was apparently the key man in organizing a majority vote in favour of partition at the UN General Assembly in New York, over the objections of the Arab delegations—work that he did without the approval of Prime Minister Mackenzie King. As a result, Pearson became known in Palestine as "the Balfour of Canada".

Better known than that is Canada's role in the creation of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, drafted by McGill Law School's John Humphrey, and adopted in San Francisco the same year as the partition of Israel. Article 13 of that Declaration reads: "(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state; (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." I want to consult with Desmond Morton (historian at McGill), Rachad Antonius (historian at UQAM), and Geoffrey Pearson (President of the UN Association of Canada), all of whom I know, about the contradictory positions taken by Canada in New York and San Francisco, and to show in the film how those decisions affected the lives of the Palestinians who will be the major characters of the film.

To research "Peace-keeper at War", I travelled to Jerusalem and Ramallah in 1991 with Subhi Qawahi and Nawal Halawa, a Palestinian couple in Montreal who spent the first twenty years of their exile in Kuwait. They are active members of Canadians for Justice

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and Peace in the Middle East, through which I have met the following potential film characters:

Mazen El-Khairy was the grand-son of the Mayor of Ramleh, and the son of the District Commissioner for Jerusalem and Ramallah under the British Mandate. He has remarkable photos of the elaborate mansions in which he was raised. At the age of ten in 1948, he helped keep the resistance going against the Jewish take-over in Ramleh for two months by cleaning bullets. His family escaped to East Jerusalem, then Amman. Mazen studied civil engineering in Leicestershire, England, worked in public works in Kuwait and Nablus, led resistance against the occupation of the West Bank which began after the six-day war in 1967, and fled to Saudi Arabia to avoid arrest. He set up a construction company there, but emigrated to Canada after becoming friends with the Canadian Ambassador in Ryad. He now owns a wood mill in Hubertville, and exports newsprint, pharmaceuticals and knee braces to Libya and Korea. When he returned to Ramleh in 1997, he discovered that his grandfather's house was occupied by the Israeli Minister of the Interior. The head guard remembered his grandfather's name, let him through the gate, and poured him tea in his tent in the orange grove.

Sami Bishara Odeh was born in Jerusalem in 1934. His parents were Anglicans and spoke English well. His father was a lawyer working for the British Mandate. Their house was opposite what is now the Knesset, and is now occupied by the Turkish consul. In 1948, they fled to Zababdeh and Berseit in the West Bank. Sami studied agriculture at universities in Cairo and Beirut, but because of his good English, he got jobs as an English-Arab translator and radio announcer first in Cyprus, then in London, and then in Saudi Arabia. There he programmed and hosted a TV programme called "Drops from Every Sea", which became the most popular show in Saudi Arabia. It consisted of material he obtained from embassies in Ryad about life in foreign countries. He immigrated to Canada in 1987, and set up a translation business in the West Island of Montreal, where he also opened a tabagie franchise. He is now retired, and is a potential narrator and archivist for the film.

But the best candidate for a central film character among the Palestinians I have met so far in Montreal is Fouad Sahyoun. He was born in 1944 in Haifa, where his father was a prominent cloth merchant. They fled to Egypt in 1947, when the Fabian army Haganah starting attacking Arab communities. There, his father sold precious paintings to help finance Fouad's university studies in the US. He got degrees in computer programming and in business administration from the University of Wisconsin and NYU. IBM then hired him to open up their first office in Kuwait, where within a few years he set up his own Pan-Arab Computer Company with 350 employees. That was going too far for a Christian Palestinian in Kuwait, and he was forced out by his Chairman of the Board. So he opened up an office for IBM in Beirut, saw a business possibility in one-hour photo labs, and soon had a chain of shops in Lebanon and Jordan. As a public figure, he was kidnapped for ransom by a gang of Druse Christians, who were allies with the Palestinians in the civil war then raging in Lebanon. They freed him when they learned that he was both a Christian and a Palestinian.

Fouad felt the time had come to leave the Middle East. He was interviewed by a sympathetic immigration officer in the Canadian Embassy, and arrived in Montreal in 1990. Here he rose to prominence in the real-estate business, and was asked last year to run on the mayor's winning ticket in the Town of Mt. Royal. He won his riding with an easy majority.

In spite of this amazing story of success, due not only to his business acumen, but also to his humane wit and humour, Fouad still feels like he once did as a lost child in Egypt--unsettled, defensive, unsure of his identity, always on the alert. He dreams of helping his people back home. He's an active member of Canadians for Peace and Justice in the Middle East. He underwent a wrenching emotional experience last year when he returned to Haifa for the first time, and showed his daughter Laila the house he lived in until he was 4. He then visited his wife's family in Ramallah, where her grandfather Nasser had established the University of Berseit. He also visited his friend Fouad Sinora, the President of Lebanon, and tried to persuade him to establish a Ministry of Palestinians to deal with the 500,000 people still living in squalid refugee camps.

Maybe it's through his children that Fouad hopes to make use of these connections. His daughter Laila, a graduate of the McGill Law School, spent some time in Ramallah in 2000 helping the PLO prepare by-laws for the new state constitution. In Montreal, she works as legal counsel to Tembec Forest Products. I made an NFB film in 1980 about the founding of that company as an experiment in union-management co-ownership. It's called "Temiscaming, Quebec". I haven't met Laila yet, but we will have memories to share when I do.

I can see structuring a film around another return home to Haifa and Ramallah by Fouad and Laila. Fouad is willing to do it. Ramallah is where Laila has worked with the PLO. It is also her mother's home. I have been in both cities—in Ramallah to meet the family of Nawal Halawa, and in Haifa to visit the Ba'hai Temple, which is one of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

There is another father-daughter pair in Montreal who are potential film characters. Rania Arabi is a young woman who spent a year in Palestine in 2002 researching for her MA in anthropology at Concordia University. Her father had been born in Jaffa in 1941, and in 1948 had fled with his family to Kuwait, where Rania was born. Her father succeeded in setting up a fruit-importing business there. In spite of their second-class status as Palestinians, the business flourished until Arafat's support of Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991 resulted in the expulsion of 300,000 Palestinians from Kuwait. Rania's family were in Montreal within a year, where her father tried to forget about Palestine.

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Rania managed to get her father to return for a short visit while she was there in 2002. He first went to Ramallah, where his brother was acting as the PLO's Minister of Culture, and there he succumbed to Rania's plead to show her the house in Jaffa where he had spent his childhood. It was a wrenching experience for him. His father had been a prominent merchant in the town, and occupied a gorgeous house. It was now a duplex, with a Palestine family in one end and a Jewish family in the other. The large central hall

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which once served at a reception centre was now abandoned and used as a no-man's land between the two hostile families. The yard which once bloomed with fig, lemon and orange trees was now empty. Rania's video of the event shows her father sitting on a bench in the yard looking dejected.

Rania's MA thesis is called "The Notion of Homeland in Palestine....under Israeli Occupation". It is an eloquent description of the powerful attachment that Palestinians keep for their homeland no matter how long they have been away or how far they have travelled. It is in such total contradiction to the Zionist vision of Palestine as the promised land of Canaan (Exodus 3:8), that it leaves you wondering how there can ever be a resolution to this conflict unless both groups can find a way to share access to all of the land they both see as their home. There are Palestinians and Jews in Montreal and Jerusalem discussing the possibility of some day building a two-nation single state together based on the Canadian federal model. Count Bernadotte was trying to work out a solution of that sort as UN mediator when he was assassinated by the Stern Gang in Jerusalem in August 1948.

It's only a dream. But you can't have hope without dreams. And you can't live without hope. So I will look for a way to see that idea being discussed in this film. Rania belongs to a group called the Palestinian-Jewish Dialogue that meets regularly in the Westmount YMCA. Fouad Sahyoun used to attend their meetings before he decided to run for public office. It is co-chaired by two women approaching forty: Ronit, a Jew, and Nada, a Palestinian. Ronit is a former conscript in the Israeli army who deserted when she learned what she was expected to do to enforce the occupation. Nada said at a meeting I attended: "We Palestinians and Jews are like Siamese twins. The occupation is corrupting us both. If you have a just cause, you don't need to spill blood."

What is missing in this proposal is a character who is a refugee. There are several of them in Montreal who have come directly from derelict refugee camps in Lebanon or Syria and who are seeking refugee status here. Rabie Masri, a 27-year-old graduate student at the University of Montreal, is helping them deal with government and welfare agencies. He tells me that he knows four or five of them old enough to have lived through 1948, and who would be willing to talk. He has just returned from a visit to his own family in Lebanon, but would have time to work with me as of next week.

I would need six weeks to research and write, including two weeks in Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffe and Ramallah with a guide-translator.

Martin Duckworth
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